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## Dorothy Sayers and the Mutual Admiration Society: Friendship and Creative Writing in an Oxford Women's Literary Group

Barbara M. Prescott

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# **Dorothy L. Sayers and the Mutual Admiration Society: Friendship and Creative Writing in an Oxford Women’s Literary Group**

by Barbara M. Prescott

Barbara Mary Prescott, M.A., M.Ed., is a researcher of writing communities and the writing process. She has advanced degrees from the University of Illinois and the University of Wisconsin, including post-graduate research in Language and Literacy at Stanford University. She has published numerous articles on the writing process and is currently researching the poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers.

*Companions in this airy hermitage.*  
—Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*

Women students at Oxford University prior to 1920 found themselves in somewhat of a curious situation. They were allowed to attend university, take classes and exams, prove their academic value, but they were not allowed to receive degrees. In point of fact, women attending Oxford University prior to October 7, 1920<sup>1</sup> were not given the rights of matriculation, that is, of full student status. They were there ‘on probation’, a situation of which these women students were very well aware.<sup>2</sup> However, acceptance to the university was certainly an honor and sought, in fact coveted, by young learned women at the time. Within the Oxford world, Somerville College was noted to be the “school for women” rather than the “school for ladies.” From its early days, this college encouraged a strong spirit of individualism among its students.<sup>3</sup> Somerville’s proudly held reputation was certainly attractive to the young independent woman scholar of the day. The

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1 On October 7, 1920, women were officially allowed, by university decree, to matriculate at Oxford (i.e., become a recognized and official part of the Oxford scholarly community) and to graduate with an official Oxford degree and diploma. Therefore, the first class of women to matriculate and receive a degree at Oxford University was that of the 1920 entering class. The first graduation occurred at Oxford also in 1920, officially granting a degree to those women students who had met the requirements previous to 1920. Dorothy L. Sayers was among this graduating class, although she had actually gone down from Oxford in 1915.

2 Frankenburg, 1975, p. 59.

3 Batson, p. 156.

principal of Somerville at the time was Emily Penrose, a strict but forward thinking administrator who made the raising of academic standards one of her chief objectives. She believed that women should take the full degree course even if the degree itself was denied them. Emily Penrose's insistence upon fulfillment of the degree requirements by Somerville students facilitated the later validation, in 1920, of their right to an official Oxford degree.<sup>4</sup>

Into this fairly complex situation, Dorothy L. Sayers, a young and hopeful student recipient of the Gilchrist Scholarship for Modern Languages, arrived in Oxford in October 1912 at the age of nineteen. By November, Dorothy and two other Somerville students, Amphyllis (Amphy) Middlemore and Charis Ursula Barnett, had formed a women's writing community, ostensibly for the purpose of reading and critiquing one another's writing efforts. Dorothy named it the "Mutual Admiration Society,"<sup>5</sup> henceforth referred to as the MAS. Dorothy Sayers chose this name for a variety of reasons, some of which are rather amusing and subtle. First, as she remarked, "if we didn't give ourselves that title, the rest of College would."<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the name was meant to be humorous, meant to soften its closed status, making its existence tolerable, even attractive, among students. Further, one cannot help but think there was additional humor involved (knowing Dorothy's gift for irony), as the MAS, by its very name, threw the ball back to those who looked upon women students at Oxford with hidden disdain or trepidation, aiming, with subtlety, that name toward male dominated Oxford.

For these young students, the opportunity of belonging to a writing circle, a community of like-minded women, within their new, sometimes bewildering, academic environment, was a welcome addition to life at Somerville. Writers gravitate toward one another,

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4 In 1920, the first class of women graduates, Dorothy Sayers, Muriel Jaeger, and Muriel St. Clare Byrne among them, participated in the university graduation ceremony and had the distinction of receiving an official Oxford BA degree. DLS also received, on that date, an MA in French.

5 This was not the first writing group at Somerville. In the late 1800s, a mysterious society calling itself 'The Mermaids' was also formed by Somerville students to be a writing support community and platform. Somewhat later than 'The Mermaids', an exclusive Somerville writing club was formed called the 'Associated Prigs' who were defined by solemn earnestness in their meetings and writing. The Mutual Admiration Society "shrugged off the excessive earnestness and became a more social network" (Batson, p. 150).

6 Frankenburg, 1975, p. 63.

and writing communities occur frequently in a university environment. The Inklings themselves adopted their name from a former Oxford student writing society. However, roughly twenty-five years earlier than the formation of the Inklings at Oxford came the MAS, another ironically-titled writing circle with very similar intent and *raison d'être* to that of the Inklings: to share their own poems, stories, and essays; to inspire one another by appreciation, analysis and critique, sometimes severe, of one another's compositions; and to support one another in the friendship of their company. Furthermore, both societies elected into membership only those people with whom they felt comfortable.<sup>7</sup> Both groups were serious about their writing and serious about one another's writing yet discussed their work within an informal yet sometimes argumentative circle, marked by stimulating conversation. They were friends of the spirit and mind.

Despite their similarities, the Inklings and the MAS had two distinct differences: status and gender. The nineteen canonical Inklings, led by C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, were men secure within their professional lives in Oxford and its environs, secure within the closed Inkling circle, sharing mature poetry, prose, fantasy fiction, philosophical and religious essays with their critical yet encouraging writing community. Their sympathy to one another lay in their intent, seriousness of purpose, profound thought, recognized talent, and ties of friendship. In essence, these men shared sympathy of mind and spirit.

The MAS began and remained a student writing community composed entirely of women undergraduates at Somerville College, women who were only just beginning their adult lives and sought a safe haven, a place where "they could relax their guard"<sup>8</sup> and present their burgeoning efforts of poetry, prose, plays, and essays for one another's critical evaluation. In this writing circle, friendship and bonds formed which were to last, for many members, throughout their lives and which would affect both their personal and professional futures. As Charis Barnett noted casually of the MAS: "Dorothy Rowe, Amphillis Middlemore, Dorothy Sayers, Margaret Chubb—we were freshers who enjoyed each other's company, and, with others of our group, have kept in touch over the years."<sup>9</sup>

These women were strong-willed, young, independent thinkers. While clearly respecting the conventions of Oxford and Somerville,

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7 Brabazon, p. 44.

8 Batson, p. 154.

9 Frankenburg, p. 62.

they “reserved the right to use their own common sense in regulating their behavior and not to get into a state if they unwittingly overturned convention,”<sup>10</sup> often finding humor in the daily situations that were perplexing or confounding to young university women at the time. In fact, it is a testament to the independent spirit of the women of the MAS that they did not ask permission to form the society they just decided among themselves to create the company, acted upon this decision, and continued to keep the writer’s circle alive and lively through their student tenure, at least until 1915 when several members, Dorothy Sayers among them, went down from Oxford.

As I continued to find references to the MAS in the pursuit of my interest in the Oxford poetry of Dorothy Sayers,<sup>11</sup> I found myself asking, just who were these women? How many were there? To date, I have found nine securely documented members: Dorothy L. Sayers, Amphillis Middlemore, Charis Ursula Barnett, Muriel Jaeger, Margaret Amy Chubb, Marjorie Maud Barber, Muriel St. Clare Byrne, Dorothy Hanbury Rowe, and Catherine Hope Godfrey.

The MAS was a closed group, an invitation-only writers circle, with entrance criteria. A candidate submitted written poetry or prose, this work was read aloud at a meeting, and the student was voted in, or not. When Muriel St. Clare Byrne applied for membership in her first year, Dorothy Rowe noted that Byrne was “an awfully nice child who writes quite good stuff.”<sup>12</sup> Charis Barnett, when speaking of the membership, remarked that they elected only “people we liked”<sup>13</sup> and so the MAS stayed a fairly small community through 1915. Some members were given nicknames, usually informal male names. Muriel Jaeger was “Jim.” Catherine Godfrey was “Tony.” Amphillis Middlemore was “Amphy.” Marjorie Barber was “Bar.” Dorothy Rowe was “Tiddler.” Dorothy Sayers seems not to have had a verbal nickname, but often signed herself as “John Gaunt” or “J.G.,” from her role in *Admiral Guinea* and sometimes as “H.P. Rallantando,” or “rAllentando,” a not-so-subtle reference to Hugh Percy Allen, the Director of the Bach Choir and her Oxford crush. This tight circle of affectionately nicknamed friends thus grew with the purpose of providing a platform to share their writing and to help one another develop as writers and scholars and persons. “The robust criticism of contemporaries is most salutary, and we undoubtedly had the sense to

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10 Ibid., p. 156.

11 Prescott, MSb, 2016; forthcoming, 2018.

12 Frankenburg, p. 63.

13 Ibid.

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profit from it.”<sup>14</sup> Charis Barnett wrote in her autobiography, *Not Old, Madam, Vintage*, the following:

The items read at our meetings were of all kinds—plays, sonnets, foretastes of future novels, a soliloquy in verse by Nero, a dissertation on Shakespeare’s *Fairies*. My contributions included a criticism of Shaw’s plays, the discussion between Dr. Johnson and Boswell on adult suffrage, a short story, and some verse. But my most interesting recollection is that Dorothy Sayers read a conversation between the three Magi—an anticipation of *The Man Born to be King*.<sup>15</sup>

Dorothy Sayers read sonnets, ballads, lais, and other verse at the weekly MAS meetings, as written in her 1912-1914 MAS notebooks, or albums as she preferred to call them. Dorothy Rowe, having an interest in the theatre may very well have read her own plays, later revised and performed by her amateur theatre company. Early drafts of future novels, *The Question Mark* (1926) as well as *The Man with Six Senses* (1927), were read by Muriel Jaeger, as was Nero’s soliloquy in verse.<sup>16</sup> A dissertation on Shakespeare’s *Fairies* clearly would have been in the literary world of Muriel St. Clare Byrne or Amphillis Middlemore.

Furthermore, and perhaps as importantly, this community provided its female members a small, safe, friendly literary haven in the midst of a large, sometimes bewildering, male oriented university which was in itself an environment of mixed messages. On the one hand, these women were welcomed to Oxford in recognition of their brilliance. On the other hand, there was a clear, sometimes not so subtle, message that they did not belong, as a group, in Oxford by virtue of their gender. To a certain extent, partly as a result of these mixed messages, the MAS was purposely formed as a closed circle in which to share sensitive thoughts, support one another’s writing efforts, and so became for these women student writers, a mutually enhancing writing and reading community. Bonds were formed in the society that lasted throughout the lives of many MAS members. These students became writing comrades-in-arms, and almost all became lifelong friends. Perhaps more significantly, their friendships affected literary and social history.

We do not often think of student writing communities in the light of historical significance, but in the case of the MAS, argument can be

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14 Ibid.

15 Frankenbug, p. 63.

16 Letter, DLS to MJ, 7-30-13.

made that each of its members became a force within her chosen field and that some contributed appreciably to the professional writing lives of other members. The links that were formed in the MAS grew to be a web of literary, social, professional, and personal support among these gifted women. In essence, the women of the MAS became vibrant and integral parts of what can be titled a Somerville 'school of writers' by virtue of their continuing communication with one another and long term influence upon one another's literary, theatrical, teaching, or social welfare careers and writings. When viewing, in this light, the valuable effect that the women writers of the MAS had upon twentieth century literature and society, one cannot help but wish to know more about these gifted women, their writings, and to bring each from the shadow of anonymity, to rightfully credit them for their valuable lives, for their significant effect upon the history of Somerville, and particularly for their contributions to the professional careers of one another.

### POETRY FIRST

The reading, writing, and sharing of poetry were vital to the women of the MAS, and, to a certain extent, the lives of these women were poetic. They were comfortable using the language of literature and used it with the ease of scholarly confidence, sometimes even profoundly so. Most of the MAS women, not unexpectedly at this time of life, wrote verse and read their poetry within the circle. A congenial and supportive environment is almost necessary when sharing sensitive thoughts inherent in youthful poetry. It takes an amount of courage to open one's thoughts to the critique of others, and it is to the credit of this young writing community that members felt at ease so doing. Their confidence in one another was certainly an extension of friendship and mutual regard. This trust of one another, for most, lasted a lifetime.

On Wednesday evening, November 7, 1912, the MAS met for the first time. There were six members present, and those were most probably Dorothy L. Sayers, Charis Barnett, Amphy Middlemore, Muriel Jaeger, Margaret Chubb, and Dorothy Rowe. Dorothy Sayers read two poems, "Peredur"<sup>17</sup> and "Earl Ulfric."<sup>18</sup> Another girl read two

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17 "Peredur," MAS Notebook, DLS MS-164, 1912-1913. Special thanks to the Marion E. Wade Center for permission to quote.

18 "Earl Ulfric," DLS MS-365, 1910-1911. Special thanks to the Marion E. Wade Center for permission to quote.

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pieces, and Amphy served refreshments. It was considered a successful meeting.<sup>19</sup> To give an idea of the work presented, and to give a flavor of this first meeting, the following excerpts from Dorothy's two poems are included:

Peredur (v.1)

All day I wander through the meads,  
Or else at random range the wood  
Where the tall pine-trees, rood on rood,  
Stretch o'er the hill-side, dusk & brown  
With heather, that does sloping down  
To meet the river & the reeds.

A second, heroically dramatic, poem read by Dorothy was "Earl Ulfric":

Earl Ulfric (vs.1-3)

The winds howl, the waves roar –  
Earl Ulfric stands by the windy shore.  
  
"A boat to sail through the storm & wrack,  
"For the ban of blood is upon my track!"  
  
The winds howl, the waves leap—  
What boat could live on the raging deep?

In the summer of 1913, Dorothy Sayers began to write an epic poem of 700 lines titled "Sir Omez," sending verses throughout the summer to Muriel Jaeger for her opinion and critique. Sayers also sent Jaeger review copies of her poem later published in *Op. I.*, "The Gates of Paradise."<sup>20</sup>

Dorothy Sayers continued to prefer larger-than-life, heroic, and often mythic themes for her ballads, lais, sonnets, and epics, themes which she later applied to her detective fiction, Lord Peter Wimsey himself being a flawed, multi-dimensional, hero figure.<sup>21</sup> Structure was paramount to Sayers; she carefully constructed and adhered to classic rules and rhyme. Muriel (Jim) Jaeger was acknowledged to have a good ear for the language of poetry, and her opinions as well as critiques became valued by Dorothy Sayers, so much so that Sayers continued to send Jaeger copies of her poetry for review throughout her vacations from Oxford and beyond.

An annual venue of publication for the Somerville writers

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19 Letter, DLS to Parents, 11-10-12.

20 Letter DLS to MJ, Summer, 1913

21 Downing.

was *Oxford Poetry* (OP), a yearly book published by Basil Blackwell. Between 1910 and 1913, there were no poems from Somerville students included.<sup>22</sup> However, between 1914 and 1916, there was a distinct blossoming of poetry from Somerville writers included in *Oxford Poetry*, primarily from MAS members.<sup>23</sup> In 1914 Charis Ursula Barnett translated a poem from Theodore De Banville for *Oxford Poetry*, and Dorothy Rowe wrote two poems: “Asleep” and “Morpheus.” In 1915, she also wrote “An Old Rhyme Re-Sung” and Dorothy Sayers published a twelve-part “Lay” for the 1915 OP. As an interesting aside, along with Dorothy Sayers and Dorothy Rowe, a young student from Exeter College named J.R.R. Tolkien had his poem, “Goblin Feet,” published in the 1915 *Oxford Poetry* collection. In 1916, Muriel Byrne published “Devachan.” In 1917, Dorothy Sayers published “Fair Erembours, A Song of the Web”; in 1918, “Pygmalion”; and in 1919, “For Phaon,” “Sympathy,” and “Vials Full of Odours.”<sup>22</sup>

The MAS did create at least one unique volume of written work, *The Blue Moon*, containing six pieces, three of which were poems by Sayers.<sup>24</sup> Included, as well, within this published album was a short story by Dorothy Sayers, titled “Who Calls the Tune?”<sup>25</sup> The first issue remained the only issue of *The Blue Moon* by the MAS, with a copy still existing in the Somerville College archives. Elsewhere, Sayers’ “Hymn in Contemplation of Sudden Death” appeared in *Oxford Magazine*, 1915,<sup>26</sup> followed by “Icarus” in 1916. The *Fritillary*, a magazine containing news about college activities and debates was also a venue, printing several of Sayers’ Oxford poems through 1915.<sup>27</sup>

In 1916, Dorothy Sayers dedicated her first published book of poems, *Op. I.*, in part to her MAS sisters, and particularly to Dorothy Rowe, fellow poet and the director of the Second-Years’ December 1913 play, *Admiral Guinea*.<sup>28</sup> The unusual title, *Op. I.* appeared to be a subtle acknowledgement of her experiences with, as well as interest in, music (i.e., Opus I), a nod to the Bach Choir and its director, Hugh Percy Allen, along with a likely nod to the journal, *Oxford Poetry* (OP), in which she had already published poems, and to the publisher of

22 Oxford Poetry, 1910-1913.

23 Oxford Poetry, 1914-1916.

24 Letters, DLS to Dorothy Rowe (DR), Summer 1913.

25 “Who Calls the Tune?” DLS MS-239; *The Blue Moon* 1.1.

26 Mead, p. 8.

27 Ibid.

28 *Op. I.*, dedication.

this journal for whom she worked, Basil Blackwell, who, it should be noted, also published *Op. I.* in 1916, and her later volume, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs* in 1918.

Further in her career, as she began her translation of Dante, Dorothy Sayers often sent translated cantos to both Marjorie Barber, who was skilled in Italian as well as having translated Chaucer into modern English<sup>29</sup>, and Muriel St. Clare Byrne, by then a noted Shakespearean scholar, for their expert advice and review. These both, her former MAS co-members, remained an important link of literary support, information, and consultation throughout Sayers' life and various writing careers. As expressly noted by Marjorie Lamp Mead, "Friends were not a luxury in Sayers' life, enjoyed but not essential; rather friends were foundational, as necessary to Sayers as the very air she breathed."<sup>30</sup> Catherine Godfrey Mansfield and Dorothy Hanbury Rowe, as well, retained a personal and professional correspondence with Sayers, Byrne, Barber, and Jaeger, often sharing experiences of daily life with all of these women. The MAS information conduit and support web remained in full effect for decades.

During the Oxford period of her writing life, Dorothy Sayers was primarily a poet. She experimented with a number of poetic structures, such as sonnets, lais, and ballads to complement various themes: medieval stories, epics, religious and classic myths and legends. We do not usually think of Dorothy Sayers in light of her poetry, but she certainly considered herself first and foremost a poet. She began her writing life with poetry and translation and ended her writing life with the translation of poetry.

As I study the poems she wrote during her time at Oxford,<sup>31</sup> I am further persuaded that the skills Dorothy Sayers acquired composing poetry deeply influenced her later prose work. However, in her early Oxford days, Sayers appeared to be somewhat reluctant to write prose:

"I cannot get any ideas for prose. Prose is a thing (now is it? is it a thing? it's not a person at any rate. Well, thing will have to do)—a thing I only write upon compulsion & then badly" (Letter to Jaeger, July 1913). As Sayers continued to experiment with various genres, she also continued to transfer successfully, in very subtle but effective ways, the structure applied to poetry, toward her fiction, essays, and plays. To Dorothy L. Sayers writing poetry and prose became, through

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29 Letters, Marjorie Barber to DLS, 1935-1949 (423b).

30 Mead, 1994, p. 8.

31 Prescott, MSA, 2015; forthcoming, 2017.

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time and experience, a feedback loop, each functioning to support the other, each lending structure to the other. Her command of various genre structures within the writing process, interestingly, can be identified in Sayers' reader friendly, storytelling, approach to the translations of the beautifully dramatic story poems of Dante.

### STORY TELLING AND NARRATIVE FICTION

One subtle thread that weaves through the literary lives of several MAS women is the ability to recognize coherent story construction and the skill to write clear narrative that is easily understandable to the reader. Dorothy L. Sayers certainly learned to write a good story. To be a good story teller, one must have a good sense of audience.<sup>32</sup> She noticed everything about people, and in detail.<sup>33</sup> Dorothy Sayers' friend, Amphy Middlemore, was acknowledged as well, at Godolphin and at Somerville, for her own skill in creating narrative, that is, for telling a good story. In fact, Amphy was affectionately described by her friends and, later, by students as "the world's best storyteller."<sup>34</sup> Her gift for story construction, one which she certainly shared during MAS meetings, may have been a factor in Dorothy Sayers' own decision to venture, however reluctantly at the time, into the world of writing narrative prose.

Sayers presented at least one such story at an MAS meeting. The case in point was a puzzle-in-story-form titled, "Who Calls the Tune?,"<sup>35</sup> an intriguing tale written almost as a prototype mystery<sup>36</sup> years before her first detective novel, *Whose Body?* (1923), partly nursed by Muriel Jaeger, was published and almost a decade before her short story, "The [Fascinating] Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will" was published (1925).<sup>37</sup>

The effect of Amphy Middlemore's talent in story construction would not have been lost on Sayers nor the other MAS writers. Dorothy Sayers' sharp observation and appreciation of the writing presented, particularly of those stories she approved, might very well have started a fermentation process in her own mind that encouraged an effort to write clear, interesting, well-structured, narrative, that is,

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32 Willerton, 2011, p. 47.

33 Brittain, 1933, pp. 105-06.

34 Godolphin News, 1914-1918.

35 "Who Calls the Tune?" DLS MS-239; The Blue Moon 1.1.

36 Prescott, MSc, 2016.

37 Lee, 1994, p. 60.

to create a good story. Furthermore, Sayers developed skill in written dialogue, partly through writing letters. Her engaging letters are written conversations, verbal text. Furthermore, the clear narrative techniques and engaging dialogue which Dorothy Sayers developed in her Wimsey series, in addition to her early ability to structure language in poetry, certainly affected her later style in translation, aiding Sayers' confidence and achievement in tackling the story poems of Dante.

Later in their communication, the reference to enjoyment as a property of good story-telling resurfaces between Marjorie Barber and Dorothy Sayers when Sayers sends her a translated copy of *L'Inferno*. Barber notes that the translation was a joy primarily because Sayers made Dante approachable; he became, "just like somebody sitting there in an armchair and telling you a story."<sup>38</sup> Later Sayers uses this quote of Barber's to title one of her papers about Dante, and she, herself, notes in a letter to Charles Williams, "I knew everybody had got the wrong idea of D., same as I had."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Marjorie Barber's own interpretation and modern translation of the works of Chaucer may indeed have partly inspired and encouraged Sayers' decision to attend to her own roots by translating Dante.

Amphy Middlemore, Marjorie Barber, Muriel Jaeger, and certainly Muriel St. Clare Byrne may be seen, in different ways, to have influenced Dorothy Sayers' blossoming interest at Oxford in the writing of fiction as well as to have encouraged later her clear, story-telling, approach to Dante. In addition, Muriel Jaeger took an active part as commentator and encourager while Dorothy Sayers was creating her first novel, *Whose Body?* For that literary support, Sayers dedicated her first detective novel to Muriel Jaeger:

Dear Jim:

This book is your fault. If it had not been for your brutal insistence, Lord Peter would never have staggered through to the end of this enquiry. Pray consider that he thanks you with his accustomed suavity.

Yours ever,

DLS<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, the communication channels among the MAS women, remaining open through letters and visits to one another

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38 Letters Barber to DLS, 1942-1957 (423a).

39 Reynolds, 2006: 122; Folder 423b, Marion E. Wade Center.

40 *Whose Body?* Dedication page.

and spanning decades, recounted the daily doings of their lives and substantially added to the shared narrative of those lives. Sayers' subtly powerful and satisfyingly structured writing, particularly her detective fiction, did not occur spontaneously—it was a long process in the making and influenced by many individuals, however seemingly unexpectedly the venture of detective fiction writing materialized in her career. Sayers was not a solitary writer; she was, however, an experiential writer who gathered from and shared her work with many friends, particularly with members of the MAS.

### ACTING, PLAYWRITING, AND THE FUN OF THEATRE

“Amateur theatricals had a permanent place in college.”<sup>41</sup> The theatre was always a welcome topic among the students of Somerville, and this writing community was equally enthusiastic for anything dealing with theatre: writing, acting, directing or attending. Playwriting was popular among the writers of the MAS. Charis Barnett and Dorothy Rowe were known for their playwriting efforts. In February 1913, together they wrote, read to the group, and starred together in, a spoof play titled, “Hamlet, the Pragger-Dagger,”<sup>42</sup> brazenly revising the plot of Hamlet and blithely rewriting the play to include a case of measles at Somerville. Cases of measles, apparently, were running rampant through Oxford in early 1913, and this play gave a much needed outlet to the anxiety and inconvenience involved. It was a huge success. Dorothy Rowe played a “wildly hilarious”<sup>43</sup> Hamlet and Charis played Horatio (as well as being stage-manager). According to Charis Barnett, “The show elicited such loud and prolonged explosions of laughter, that we were asked to repeat it to the whole college, dons and students, which we did, with an equally riotous reception.”<sup>44</sup>

Dorothy Sayers and Muriel St. Clare Byrne later famously collaborated on the play, *Busman's Honeymoon*. They, however, took this writing very seriously. During the collaboration, both Sayers and Byrne admit to struggling with the structure of the play, with the application of their ideals to the story, ideals of remaining fair to the reader. The authors state that they do not attempt to provide a “perfect dramatic formula for the presentation of the fair-play rule,”

41 Frankenburg, 1975, p. 66.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., p. 67.

44 Ibid.

but that, “They suggest, however, that the future development of the detective play may lie in this direction, being convinced that neither sensation without thought nor argument without emotion can ever provide the basis for any permanent artistic structure.”<sup>45</sup> The fair-play rule was of paramount importance to Dorothy Sayers throughout her detective writing history, and one cannot help but think she was well schooled at Somerville, under the care of Emily Penrose, to adhere unflinchingly to this rule.

### ADVENTURING WRITERS ALL

Friendship within a community of women writers takes on additional dimension. Not only are personal lives involved, but professional lives are involved as well. The more deeply I delve into the history of these complex women, the finer and more intricate becomes the web of ties among them: ties of professional association, ties of personal and career influence, ties of affection and support, ties of shared knowledge and continued analysis of one another’s writing efforts, continued sharing of ideas, and communication of ties to daily life among them. Some members collaborated with others in authorship, as in the earlier discussion of *Busman’s Honeymoon*. Some inspired one another to greater work, notably Marjorie Barber and Muriel St. Clare Byrne in their support and editing efforts toward Sayers’ Dante translations, and some inspired one another by their social conscience and practical application of those principles, notably Margaret Chubb Pyke’s effect upon the social reform research of Muriel Jaeger.<sup>46</sup> This mission of Margaret Chubb’s was reported, by Charis Barnett, to influence other girls at Somerville, as well as the MAS members, toward social welfare work, volunteering, and writing.

During one MAS meeting in the Spring of 1913, Margaret Chubb described to the members a play she had seen, titled *Eugenics*, written by a fifteen-year-old girl.<sup>47</sup> This particular play had a deep effect upon Margaret Chubb who later became Chairman of the UK Family Planning Association.<sup>48</sup> Her son established the Margaret Pyke Memorial Trust<sup>49</sup> for family planning and training. Muriel

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45 Sayers & Byrne, 1937, Intro.

46 Jaeger, 1956, dedication.

47 Frankenburg, 1975, p. 66.

48 Ibid., pp. 66-67.

49 Ibid., p. 67.

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Jaeger consulted Margaret Pyke during her own later historical research on social reform. The drama of all this would not have been lost on Dorothy Sayers who, in turn, later wrote several essays (*Unpopular Opinions*, 1946) on the question of social morality and Christian responsibility toward questions of humanity and welfare.

By these examples, we are given a glimpse into the complexity and richness of the relationships between and among the members of the MAS through their tenure at Oxford, throughout their chosen fields of profession, and throughout their writing and research lives. Despite their divergent paths, the women of the MAS continued to affect, to a great degree, one another's professional and personal lives throughout their post-Oxford days. That which began as a small society of student writers at Oxford grew to be a web of published writers, teachers, and agents of social change.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

My intent through this paper was to bring the Somerville women writers of the MAS out from the shadows, to introduce them as strong, talented, creative student writers who became vibrant women, prolific authors, theatrical figures, social activists, teachers, and scholars in their own right. These women wrote at a pivotal time, each dealing with the dramatic and profound effects of World War I upon their own lives and upon history. Their writings and lives, in turn, had profound effect upon their culture. Furthermore, it is important to recognize how very much this community of women writers and friends deeply affected and continued to affect the life of Dorothy L. Sayers. The Mutual Admiration Society of Somerville became an interrelated web of women writers and activists linked by their mutual interests, shared spirit of independence, their creative collaboration and, most of all, by their enduring friendship. In doing so, they have played a significant, if little-noted role influencing the literary and intellectual culture for women in the twentieth century.

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